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Grammer — A new voice in the limelight

By DAN TAYLOR

When singer Robert Grammer got a phone call asking if he'd like to join that classic folk trio, the Limeliters, he didn't know what to say.

"I didn't know who the Limeliters were," Grammer confessed. "In fact, I don't think I'd ever heard them perform."

At 30, Grammer is a couple of decades younger than the three founding members: Alex Hassilev, Lou Gottlieb and Glenn Yarbrough. "I'm too young to have been a Limeliters fan. I didn't become a folk fan until Peter, Paul and Mary."

The original Limeliters lasted from 1959 to 1963. In the early 1970s, the three original members began to reunite for occasional tours. Finally, by 1980, Hassilev and Gottlieb decided they wanted to keep the Limeliters going fulltime, while Yarbrough chose a solo career.

How do you replace Glenn Yarbrough? Hassilev started asking around, and got Grammer's name through a friend of a friend. "All they knew was I lived in Southern California, so Alex called all the unions."

Grammer, originally from New Jersey, with a long stopover in Chicago, lived at Solano Beach then. Grammer's neighbors there included Dan Seals, formerly of England Dan and John Ford Coley, and brother of Jimmy Seals of Seals and Croft. Grammer and Dan Seals had become friends through their shared interest in the Baha'i Faith.

So, when the Limeliters phoned Grammer, he and Seals went to see them perform in San Diego. Yarbrough was still performing with the group then. "When I went to see them," Grammer recalled, "everything I liked about folk music" was evident: "the accessibility," "the legitimacy," "just trying to make the audience feel good and happy."

Grammer was impressed. "They were very committed to what they were doing."

In January 1981, Robert Grammer, nicknamed "Red," replaced Glenn Yarbrough in the Limeliters. And he found out that he had tackled a challenge. You can judge for yourself how well he has handled that challenge when the new Limeliters perform Dec. 10 in Rohnert Park.

The new Limeliters, formed in 1981: Alex Hassilev, Lou Gottlieb (center) and Robert Grammer

"The pressure was on me but I wasn't really aware of it," Grammer said by phone this week from his San Francisco hotel room. "You don't want to mess with people's memories."

People remembered Glenn Yarbrough's voice, not Red Grammer's. "Glenn and I don't have the same voice. I don't have that famous trill. He has one of the most definitive folk voices you can have. At first, I tried to imitate that, but I realized that's ridiculous. I'm much better when I do it my way."

The revived Limeliters' repertoire is roughly half old Limeliters' folk tunes — "Meetin' Here Tonight," "John Henry," "Hard Travelin'," "Madeira M'Dear" — and half country-flavored pop songs.

Grammer said he fills his place in the Limeliters' three-part harmony as comfortably as Yarbrough did, and on the new material no one is comparing him with Yarbrough anyway. But on Yarbrough's famous solos, the difference in voice and style is noticeable.

"The only time it's really obvious it's not Glenn singing is on 'Wayfaring Stranger,'" Grammer said, but the audiences don't seem to mind even then. "They've been very positive."

If the audiences sometimes expected Grammer to be Glenn Yarbrough, the other Limeliters never did, Grammer said. "Alex and Lou have said from the beginning they viewed this as launching my career."

That's one reason, light country music — more commercial now than folk music — has been added to the trio's act. "It's hard to imagine the Limeliters doing country material," Grammer said, "but it works."

Country music is actually a logical choice for the group, he explained. "Lou and Alex, unlike Glenn and unlike myself, have very robust voices. Baritones aren't in these days. The only area of music where there are three-part harmonies and rich, robust voices is country music."

For the past couple of decades, tenors have dominated pop music, Grammer said. "I have a very pop voice." And Grammer hopes that he may pursue a solo career someday, "along the lines of a John Denver," who also apprenticed in a folk group, the Chad Mitchell Trio.

In the meantime, Grammer and his wife Kathy have recorded and released their own casette album, "Rolling Along, Singing a Song," a tape of songs and games designed to keep small children occupied on long car trips. The project started one day when the Grammers found themselves caught in traffic, trying to keep their three-year-old son David from getting too restless.

The Grammers, like Hassilev and Gottlieb, live in the Los Angeles area now.

The Limeliters also hope to record and release their own records, having tried without success to get backing from major record labels. "We are desparately trying to record some of our good new material," Grammer said.

The Limeliters, the Four Freshman and comedian Skip Stephenson of the "Real People" television series will perform at 8 p.m. Dec. 10 in the Sonoma State University main gymnasium.Tickets cost $8, $10 and $12.50. Tickets are available at the Rohnert Park Chamber of Commerce, People's Music in Sebastobol and Music Coop in Petaluma. The Rohnert Park Chamber of Commerce also offers ticket delivery. For information phone 584-1415.

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